

LAVANI LITERATURE AS A SOURCE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT

History of Lavani Originated in the medieval times *lavani* continues to be a folk performance even now. Their geographical areas of movements were mainly in Maharashtra, albeit some of them went to the places like Thanjavur., some parts of present Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The *peshwas* and their *sardars* (officers) celebrated the festivals like *Holi* and *Dasahara* with grandeur and many of the *shahirs* were a part and parcel of these festivals. Peshwa period generally, the pomp and show in the celebrations of the Hindu festivals increased. The festivals like *Ganeshotsav* and *Sankranti* also came to be celebrated with pomp. In the latter Peshwa period. The *lavanis* contain various textile varieties and thereby it is possible to reconstruct the textile history of Maharashtra. The *lavanis* contain description of the palaces and gardens. Wearing the ornaments made of pearls, diamonds, rubies and emeralds was considered to be prestigious. *lavani* had been an integral part of a broader folk- performance called *tamasha*. though at times poetic fancy gets reflected in the compositions the descriptions in lavani do contain the picture of the life that the *shahirs* had seen and hence such descriptions are a source of history.

KEYWORDS: Specially Patronised, Performance

INTRODUCTION

History of Lavani

Originated in the medieval times *lavani* continues to be a folk performance even now. Though *lavanis* are more popular as dance-forms or folk performances *Lavani* compositions form an integral part of the *shahiri* literature in Marathi language. The term ‘*shahiri*’ denotes the literary compositions left behind by the *shahirs* (poets) who were the moving minstrels during medieval times. Their geographical areas of movements were mainly in Maharashtra, albeit some of them went to the places like Thanjavur., Ahmedabad and some parts of present Madhya Pradesh. *Lavanis* were composed on various issues like cities, deities and festivals while the main theme was love.

The *lavani* compositions were poetic and were not written initially. *Lavani* was merely a song that was sung as per the local tunes and the various words used therein clearly indicate its characteristic as a form of folk performance. They were actually the on-the-spot creations of the *shahirs*. Much later, towards the end of eighteenth century, *lavanis* came to be scribbled in Modi script of Marathi language. They were later transliterated into Devanagari script of Marathi language and thus became known to people more. The *lavanis* are broadly classified into two- *fadachi lavani* and *baithakichi lavani*. Of these, the latter type was more specially patronised by the last two *Peshwas* Sawai Madhavrao (1775-1795) and Bajirao II (1795-1818). *Baithakichi lavani* did not include a dance but was erotic through semiotic gestures and was in keeping with the interests of the patrons.

They were fascinated by certain *lavanis* so much so that they gave the attire of classical music to the *lavanis*. Especially Honaji Bala was said to be in the company of these singers who were brought from outside Maharashtra. Thus, this period also symbolizes a combination of the classical songs with the folk music. The history of music shows that such amalgamations have been there in the past of the two types of music named *margi* and *desi*. The *lavanis* throw light upon the contemporary social and cultural life of the Deccan. This is quite obvious because the *shahirs* were an eyewitness to the affluence that the Pesh was wished to form a model of in the Deccan.

Spread of Lavanis

Lavani though originated in Maharashtra also came to be sung and performed in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Thanjavur. The *shahirs* were patronized by the *sardars* of the *Peshwas* in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The researcher is even now undertaking a survey of the places in Madhya Pradesh to understand the extent of this living culture. The life-story of the *shahir* Anant Fandi shows that Ahilyabai Holkar, the daughter-in-law of Malharrao Holkar, the veteran Maratha *sardar* posted at Indore patronized him for some time. In fact he started composing a different *shahiri* at her advice. One branch of Bhosle family flourished at Tanjavar. The Bhosles of Tanjore, especially, Sarfoji Bhosle, were great patrons of art and literature. In the collection of these southern *lavanis* one gets also the *lavanis* of the *shahirs* like Honaji Bala. The Marathi language of these *lavanis* is not the same as that of Marathi of Maharashtra. The Gaikwads of Baroda were also the patrons of art, learning and literature. The documentary evidence shows that they also patronized the *shahirs* coming from Maharashtra. The *shahirs* could not use the same language then. It was but natural for the *shahirs* to get adapted into the linguistic mode of the province where they performed.

Thus to a certain extent language of the *lavanis* becomes an indicator of the changing culture. Some *lavanis* do indicate such combination of the languages. Many *lavanis* are influenced by Hindi poetry. The heroines in some *lavanis* are described in Gujarati dress. Some *lavanis* describe the grandeur of the cities like Maheshwar (under the power of Holkars), Ahmedabad and Baroda that were under the control of Gaikwads. Classification of the *lavanis* according to the language used in the *lavanis* will provide a clue to the movements of the *shahirs* and also the extent of *lavani* performance. It is even possible to chalk out a rough map of the movements of the *shahirs*. The *shahirs* did not reach Bombay before Bapurao Krishna Kulkarni or Patthe Bapurao. There is a difference in the language of the previously mentioned *shahirs* and that of Patthe Bapurao. His famous *lavani* on the city of Bombay is known as *Mumbaichi Lavani*.

Lavanis on Festivals

The *peshwas* and their *sardars* (officers) celebrated the festivals like *Holi* and *Dasahara* with grandeur and many of the *shahirs* were a part and parcel of these festivals. The festivals like *Ganeshotsav* and *Sankranti* also came to be celebrated with pomp. In the latter Peshwa period (i.e. from the period of Peshwa Madhavrao, 1761-72 onwards) generally, the pomp and show in the celebrations of the Hindu festivals increased. Dance became an essential aspect of the celebrations. Since the *shahirs* were invited to perform on these occasions descriptions of these festivals in the *lavanis* was obvious. Of course of all these festivals the festival that generated the feeling of eroticism most was *Holi* (the festival of colours). There are some *lavanis* associated with *Holi* festival of Maharashtra. *Holi* was also known as *shimga*. In pre-Peshwa times this festival involved only the worship of *Holika* goddess and fire.

The festival of colours was an addition during the *Peshwa* period. In pre- *Peshwa* times the festival of colours was a part and parcel of *Holi* and used to be celebrated in North India on a large scale. The *sardars* of the *Peshwas* in the north like Shinde and Holkar were so fascinated by the exchange of colours between the men and women that they also started celebrating it in their states of Gwalior and Indore. In fact Mahadaji Shinde described the colour festival in the court of

Sawai Madhavrao. The *Peshwa* desirous to enjoy the festival willingly introduced it in Maharashtra. The *lavanis* describing the colour festival often mention *gulalgota*. Playing with *gulalgota* was a very important action during this festival. *Gulalgota* was a small ball made by putting *gulal* (dry red powder) in the hollow of mica. When it dashed against any surface it broke splashing the powder in the air. Other colours were mixed in water and the tanks were filled with such coloured waters. The nature of the festival was deeply rooted in the mythological tradition according to which there was a congregation of Lord Krishna and the *Gopis* (female companions of Krishna) on the occasion of the colour festival. In the *lavanis* of the *shahirs* there was a superimposition of the personality of Krishna onto that of the *Peshwa*. The *Peshwa's* women appeared to the *shahirs* as *gopis* participating in and enjoying the colourful moments. The atmosphere of this festival was particularly conducive to feelings of love.

Mention of Spacious Houses and Gardens

The *lavanis* contain description of the palaces and gardens. Certain urban centres mentioned in the *lavanis* existed in the pre-*Peshwa* times as well. But more cities came up since the time of Peshwa Nana Saheb. The plans of beautification of the city of Poona started in the rule of Nana Saheb Peshwa. This was because after the death of Shahu he transferred the administrative centre to Poona in 1749. Since then various 'Peths' (localities), *Wadas* (mansions) came to be constructed to accommodate the *sardars* who migrated to Poona. The schemes for additional water supply to the city of Poona were undertaken. These undoubtedly helped gardening in Poona.

There is an evidence to show that there was a garden in Shaniwarwada, the palace of the *Peshwas*. The architectural beauty of the palace increased when Nana Fadnis, the caretaker of Sawai Madhavrao took special efforts. Gardening also received encouragement from the last Peshwa Bajirao II. One historical document gives a long list of the plants ordered by him from Aurangabad in 1813. The foreign travellers visiting the palace during this time and that of Peshwa Bajirao II have described the beauty of the palace. The *lavanis* of the *shahirs* also have the names of the plants of flowers and fruits. They corroborate with the historical records that prove the growth of Poona and Shaniwarwada.

In fact such descriptions add to the erotic feelings depicted in the *lavanis*. Interestingly, some *lavanis* use the word *haveli* for the palace. Actually, the concept of *haveli* was not originally in Maharashtra. *Haveli* was a palace in Rajasthan and Marwad. Thus the induction of the word *haveli* in the *lavanis* means that the *shahirs* wished to symbolically get associated with the grandeur of the North India. The *havelis* in the *lavanis* are described having rich carpets and the curtains of expensive cloth materials. *Havelis* had also gardens attached to them. Particularly some *lavanis* of the *shahir* Prabhakar that may be cited as the examples of ornate poetry contain the descriptions of the *havelis* and of the floral life of Poona. Saganbhau also had depicted the luxurious life of the *Peshwas*. One of his *lavanis* contains the following names of flowers: 'Gulchabu', 'Gultop', 'Motiya', 'Mogra', 'Shevanti', 'Narangya', 'Khiranya', 'Tuti', 'Jai', 'Ratanjan', 'Batamogra', 'Malati', 'Douna' 'Gulab', 'Kekati'.

The ornaments appearing in the *lavanis* were worn by the contemporary cultured women of the high castes. Wearing the ornaments made of pearls, diamonds, rubies and emeralds was considered to be prestigious. A heroine in one of the *lavanis* of Shahir Prabhakar is described wearing the following ornaments: *Vajrateek*, *Panadi*, *Chinchapeti*, *Tanmani*, *Kantha*, *Chandrahari*, *Putalyanchi Mal*. A *lavani* of Saganbhau gives some additional names of the ornaments like *Bindi*, *Seesphul*, *Jodavya*. Some of the jewellers have preserved the traditional jewellery in their personal collections even now. Many of these ornaments are mentioned also in the historical records like *Peshwa Daftar*.

Some precious stones formed also part of the poetic imagery of the *lavanis*. The *shahir* Honaji in one of his *lavanis* calls the shiny face of the heroine a *surati dana*. If the pearl was obtained in the port of Surat it came to be known as *surati dana*. This port has been of commercial importance right from ancient times. A peep into the commercial history of the medieval times would show that Surat was connected to Hormuz, a port in the Persian Gulf. Hormuz was famous for the lustrous pearls. These used to be brought from Hormuz to Surat for trade in India. This sea trade route is quite often mentioned in the travelogues of the travellers who visited India during medieval times. Nicolao Manucci, an Italian traveller for example states that Hormuz was a connecting link between the Arab world and India. Since the pearls of the best quality came from Hormuz they were also called *hormuji*. A reference from one of the *lavanis* may be quoted as an example where the pearls are called the ‘lustrous grains of Hormuz’. These pearls were also called *guladhawa* on account of the similarity of their lustre with that of the syrup of jaggery. The *Peshwas* were very particular in sending orders to their northern officers to obtain these pearls.

The gold *mohors* were never struck by the Marathas at any scale. Hence to have *mohors* was considered to be a prestige symbol. Some *mohors* used to be made as an imitation of *Alamshahi mohors*. *Alamshahi mohor* was most probably *Delhi sikka*. Some of the names of the other *mohors* were *Panchamel*, *Aurangabadi*, *Ajmer*, *Ahmadabadi*, *Muhammadshahi*, *Shetshahahi*.

Lavani compositions show that at times the words like *mohors* and *putalis* are used merely as the coins while sometimes they are a part of the poetic imagery. The coins used to be also given as charity. The *shahirs* thus were aware of the commercial activities of their patrons. The *lavanis* that were a part of *tamasha* and those that were performed as *baithakichya lavanya* were erotic to create the necessary atmosphere. The words therein were also so chosen as to convey the erotic sentiment. The erotic sentiment was generated especially by the portrayal of the female body. The double-meant words in the *lavanis* are indicators of the concept of virginity or female sexuality.

Fabrics in Lavanis

The *lavanis* contain various textile varieties and thereby it is possible to reconstruct the textile history of Maharashtra. Since the *lavanis* were performed also at the trade centers and on the occasions of village fairs references to the textiles are but natural. The composition of the village markets show that the fairs and the markets on many occasions went hand in hand. Since the framework of the *lavani* is poetic, the references to the textiles are in the form of the poetic imagery. The *lavanis* were composed on various topics like the cities, festivals.

Right from the ancient times Paithan to Pratishthan was famous for the exquisite textiles. Located on the north bank of the river Godavari Paithan is one of the oldest cities in the Deccan. Well known as Pratishthan in ancient times it was considered to be the gateway of India to which the trade centers were connected. The importance of this place is narrated in the descriptions and the travelogues of the foreign travelers. Paithan has been a very famous center for *tiwat* (turbans), *sarres*, *shalus*, (the exquisite silk and *jari sarees* worn on the occasions like marriage). Numerous qualities of *lugdas* are available in medieval Marathi literature. *Lugde* has been the general Marathi word for a nine-yard *saree*. Interestingly, of the twenty five varieties mentioned in the chronicles of Delhi Sultanate that comprised of the silken and cotton stuffs together, there is a mention in the cotton variety called *Deogiri* or *jama-I-deogiri*. This has been referred to as the highly valued cotton since the 7th cen. A. D. *Jama -i- Deogiri* was mentioned to be of superfine quality and was even costlier than silk. One wonders whether this cloth was the same as the one manufactured at Paithan. This is because right from the Maratha period till this date there is no mention of the type of cloth as *deogiri* while the brand name *Paithani* for

the costly *saree* is prevalent also in the modern times. It is probable that when there were attacks of Ala-ud-din Khilji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq on Deogiri the artisans from Paithan came to Deogiri and produced cotton for the new rulers. This possibility holds ground especially when Muhammad bin Tughlaq made a futile attempt of shifting the capital city from Delhi to Daulatabad, former Deogiri in 1327A.D. There is also another possibility. On account of the vicinity of the two places, Paithan and Deogiri, the cloth type of Paithan came to be generally known as Deogiri.

Thus the name *jama-i-deogiri* appears to have been the pre-Maratha term that was used for the best quality Deccan cotton. That the area comprising of both Paithan and Deogiri was known for the varieties of cotton including muslin is referred to also by Periplus in his travelogue Priplus of Erythrean Sea. In the accounts the names for these two places are Plithana and Tagara respectively.

Female Body Portrayal

The heroines offering their body and mind to the heroes also got justified then in the *lavanis*. Besides, the *shahirs* put the *Peshwas* and their *sardars* on the divine platform by calling them Krishna or Indra. As such then the *shahirs* also sanctioned the right of the rulers to enjoy the women. Both these gods were associated with the *gopis* or *apsaras*. Interestingly, this gets corroborated from the wall-paintings of the medieval *wadas*. The researcher in the course of this project visited many *wadas* at Wai and Satara and has obtained the photographs of the wall-paintings. The Motibag Wada of *sardar* Raste may be given as an illustration. The *wada* of Nana Fadnis at Menavali also has collection of paintings. These paintings depict Krishna with *gopis*. A somewhat identical description one gets from the *lavanis* that describe the *Peshwas* surrounded by the keeps. Thus the descriptions in the *lavanis* need to be supplemented by the material evidence. It was therefore that the researcher had undertaken the tours of the place mentioned in the beginning of this report.

Tamasha and Lavani

As described earlier *lavani* had been an integral part of a broader folk-performance called *tamasha*. Even today one can observe the same. In order to collect information about this dance culture the researcher found it necessary even to attend the *tamasha* performances. A historical evolution of *tamasha* may be given as follows.

Etymologically, *Tamasha* is an Arabic word implying different means of entertainment. It has been generally accepted that this form originated towards the end of the seventeenth century. With the arrival of Aurangzeb in the Deccan and his stationing of the troops there towards the end of seventeenth century for the pursuit of Marathas, Maharashtra got introduced to a different culture within the military camps. It has been reported that the Mughals did keep the band of entertainers including women in their camps to extend relief for the soldiers. Since the common soldiers could not afford keeping the proficient dancing girls they had to look for the locally available artist who could render them this service. Again the forms of entertainment till then could not match the taste of Mughals.

An effeminate dancer with good voice. Till the time of Bapurao Krishna Kulkarni or Patthe Bapurao(1866-1945) the male dancer performed the dance of *lavani*. Patthe Bapurao opened a new phase in the history of *Tamasha* because in his troupe Putala was the first female dancer to perform the *Lavani* dance.

The artists in *Tamasha* are of two groups representing two sects of religious beliefs viz., ‘*Kalgiwale*’ and ‘*Turewale*’. *Kalgiwale* are the followers of Maya or Lord Shiva whereas *Turewale* recognize the authority of Lord Brahma or Lord Vishnu. When these two groups enter into competition in the exciting session of ‘*Sawaal-Jababs*’ (poetic riddles) they keep the symbols of their respective sect on their ‘*Daph*’(drum). *Kalgiwale* have *Kalgi* as their symbol while ‘*Tura*’ is

the symbol of *Turewale*. *Kalgi* is like the blossom group in *Sawaal- Jabab* snatches the symbol of the other group and thus establishes its supremacy. The *sawal-jabab* portion of *tamasha* does show the philosophical understanding on the part of the *shahirs*.

Tamasha That is Presented Nowadays Has the following Features

1. *Gan* or the prayer of Lord Ganesh 2. *Gaulan*-ballet consisting of a girl and boy enacting as the love-lorn couple Radha and Krishna, Some others enacting as the friends of Radha and Krishna and a typical character ‘*mavshibai*; (a man speaking as a women). 3. *Lavani* dance performance by the dancing girls. 4. *Bhedik kavan* the session of *sawal jababs*. 5. *Mujra* the fare- well session. All these were the compositions of the *shahirs*.

The heart of *Tamasha* is ‘*Vag*’. It originated around 1860s. The word *Vag* is a form of the Marathi word ‘*Ogh*’ meaning flow or current. The idea of *vag* can be found in the necessity to avoid boredom among the spectators and to maintain the flavour in the performance of *Tamasha* till the end. *Vag* envelops within itself the speech of *sutradhar* or director with subtle humour. At times the speech may display his mimicking gestures. His monologue is known as *Batawani*” or “ *Sapatani*” and it is in keeping with the subject matter of the *tamasha*. In 1865 a *tamasgir*(performer of *Tamasha*) named Uma Savajkar with the assistance of Baba Mang performed the first *vag* called *Mohana Batav*. The theme of the eternal love of Mohana and Batav had been quite popular with the medieval *shahirs*. Later the *vag* of *Mittharani* of Patthe Bapurao became popular.

The city of Bombay started receiving the fresh influx of population from the beginning of the 19th century. The mercantile growth of Bombay required supply of labourers. Certain business families also shifted to Bombay. The census reports show that the number of male population was certainly more than that of the females. The labourers coming from the interior of Maharashtra desired to have their rural form entertainment. Thus the *tamasha* troupes started visiting Bombay mainly to provide entertainment to them. Interviews with the theatre owners reveal that initially even in Bombay *tamasha* came to be performed in the tents. *Lavanis* were never the independent programmes then but were an integral portion of *tamasha*. *Baithakichi lavani* also entered Bombay because certain business families patronized the singers of this type of *lavani*. The areas like Opera House in Bombay had tenements of these singers. Thus the city of Bombay offered the artists means of livelihood. Yet, the troupes of *tamasha* did not reside in Bombay permanently. The last surviving theatre of the nineteen theatres of *tamasha* that Mumbai had was Hanuman Theatre.

The politics of viewing operated till very lately in the society and that has even affected to a certain extent the *lavani* literature. The literature was also mistaken to be only associated with dance. But as seen above *lavanis* are an important source of history of medieval Maharashtra.

CONCLUSIONS

As the aforesaid information would show, *lavani* literature is to be considered as an important source of history of medieval Maharashtra. Even though at times poetic fancy gets reflected in the compositions the descriptions in *lavani* do contain the picture of the life that the *shahirs* had seen and hence such descriptions are a source of history.

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